

AN APOSTLE OF MARY

SAINT LOUIS MARIE DE MONTFORT

By P. M. Fennesy

Towards the end of the seventeenth-century, a young man named LOUIS MARIE GRIGNON DE LA BACHELERAIE decided to surrender all things for Christ—even his name. For his family name he substituted MONTFORT, the place of his birth. He has become famous since his canonization in 1947 as Saint Louis Marie de Montfort.

Controversial Doctrine

A “sign of contradiction” in his own time, even as the Crucified Master he served, he remains today a centre of controversy both among Christians and non-Christians. This storm of opposition lashes continually, not so much at his own person, as against his spiritual doctrine of the “True Devotion.” The violence of the tempest has, in fact, completely obscured the valuable witness of his life, so even his friends see only a confused outline of the saint they acclaim as “Tutor of the Legion of Mary,” “Apostle of Mary,” and “Missionary of the Blessed Virgin.”

This short biography is an attempt to give at least a glimpse of the remarkable man who was Founder, Missionary, Doctor, Theologian, and the spiritual father of a multitude of Marian disciples. Some acquaintance with the saint and his time is an indispensable preliminary for an understanding of the full significance of his teaching. Perhaps, by way of introduction, the principal objections to de Montfort’s spirituality should be addressed at the outset.

Principal Objections

His book on the “True Devotion” does not almost deify Mary, so that the role of Christ—His position as Mediator—is obscured. The basic ideas of his Marian teaching were centuries old when he combined them into his masterly synthesis. In the introduction to his Treatise he writes:

“Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, of all things. We labor not, as the Apostle says, except to render every man perfect in Jesus Christ. If then we establish the solid devotion to Our Lady, it is only to establish more perfectly the devotion to Jesus Christ and to put forward an easy and secure means for finding Jesus Christ.”

The “True Devotion” is familiar enough from innumerable booklets and pamphlets on the subject. However, perhaps it is not fully realized that it represents only a part of de Montfort’s doctrinal structure on “Love of the Eternal Wisdom.” “True Devotion,” though certainly his most important, is not his most comprehensive work. “Love of the Eternal Wisdom” is the key to his spirituality, of which “True Devotion” formed the fourth part.

His principal theme is his teaching on Christ–Wisdom, which is a development of Saint Paul’s doctrine of the humility of the Incarnate Word. De Montfort follows here the guidance of Berulle, and his opinions are typical of the French School of spirituality of the 17th century. Berulle drew from the teaching of Saint Paul the practical conclusion that Christians should imitate the servitude of the human nature of Christ by offering themselves totally to the Word and remaining completely dependent on Him. It is significant that de Montfort has made this idea the corner-stone of his own spirituality and, in his book on “Eternal Wisdom,” he develops it in a way that shows the broad sweep of his thought. Great importance is also given to the Passion of Christ and the need for renunciation, the purpose of which is clear from the concluding words:

“Wisdom is the Cross and the Cross is wisdom.”

Four Means

The book is wide in its scope however and proposes four principal means that must be employed to possess and love Christ.

A perfect devotion to Mary, Mother of the Incarnate Wisdom, is the fourth means, which makes it possible for Christians to offer themselves totally to the Incarnate Word and remain completely dependent on Him.

The other means are desire, prayer, and mortification. It was de Montfort's compassion for our weakness in using these means of holiness and in responding generously to God's grace that urged him to take the fourth part of his Treatise and enlarge it into a special study now known as "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin."

While "True Devotion" is undoubtedly de Montfort's most important and inspiring contribution to religious literature, it is not, as is often supposed, a complete expression of his teaching. To regard it as complete in itself is to condemn de Montfort's spirituality as unbalanced and to misunderstand both his life and his work. His principal theme is always Christ-Wisdom, and it is on this foundation that he has erected his system of spirituality. Devotion to Our Lady is not an end in itself, but a means, although a most perfect means, of possessing Jesus Christ.

Despite his style and intense spirituality, de Montfort himself is the most modern of saints—almost flamboyant in the zeal of his missionary experiments. One could easily imagine him as an eighteenth-century Bishop Sheen or Father Peyton, making full use of the spectacular and the unconventional, if only it would lead men to Christ. He was one of the greatest of the preachers and missionaries of the eighteenth-century Church and one of the most dynamic opponents of the dangerous heresies of Jansenism and Calvinism. The antidote to this insidious poison—a corruption spreading from within Christianity itself—was not only Saint Margaret Mary's revelations of devotion to the Sacred Heart but also de Montfort's teaching on devotion to Mary.

When the spirituality of Louis Marie de Montfort is seen in its true perspective, his life can be appreciated for what it was—the life of *"the herald . . . of the reign of God through Mary."* (From the address of His Eminence Frederico Cardinal Tedeschini, after unveiling the statue of Saint Louis Marie in St. Peter's, Rome.)

Beginnings

Louis was the eldest of the eight children of John Baptist Grignon. He was born on the last day of January in 1673 in the little town of Montfort-la-Canne. At Confirmation he added the name of Mary, and later substituted Montfort, his birthplace, for his family name.

When he had completed his education at the Jesuit College in Rennes, he went to Paris at the age of twenty to prepare for the priesthood. Lack of means prevented him from gaining admittance to the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice and he became a student under Abbé de la Barmondiere. When the Abbé died, Louis was left in even more destitute circumstances. He joined a community of ecclesiastics who lived a life of Spartan discipline and extreme poverty.

Poverty, Sickness

He and his fellow-students had "the pleasure of poisoning themselves" (as one of them wryly admitted) with wretched and poorly-cooked food. So primitive were the conditions under which they tried to study, work, and pray, that Louis soon became seriously ill. (Not long before he had earned a small stipend by keeping watch over the parish dead, and had spent almost the entire night—three or four times a week—in study, spiritual reading, and prayer.)

Recovery

In spite of the care that he received on his removal to hospital, his condition became rapidly worse, and there seemed no hope of survival. It was when he appeared to be on the verge of death that he calmly announced his complete recovery! Not long afterwards he began to improve and was soon able to return to his studies. In the meantime, Providence had provided him with friends, whose generosity enabled him to be admitted to the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice.

Even before his early training was completed he had gained a reputation for heroism, love of the Cross, and love of Mary. It was at this time that the Queen of Heaven began to claim him as her own.

“The Tree of Life”

Someone placed Boudon’s work on “Slavery to the Blessed Virgin” into his hands and he sensed immediately the importance and influence it was to be in his spiritual life. He soon began to share his enthusiasm with the other students and, from such a small seed, the “Tree of Life” grew to its present incredible dimensions. As he wrote later:

“If you cultivate (Mary) the Tree of Life, freshly planted in your soul by the Holy Ghost, it will grow so tall that the birds of Heaven will come to dwell in it. It will be a good tree, yielding fruit of honor and grace in due season, namely the sweet and adorable Jesus, who always has been, and always will be, the only fruit of Mary.” (From “The Tree of Life - Its Culture and Growth,” Saint Louis Marie de Montfort.)

Louis Marie de Montfort was ordained a priest on 5 June 1700 and spent the entire day in thanksgiving before the Blessed Sacrament. His first Mass was celebrated in the chapel of the Blessed Virgin in the parish church of Saint Sulpice. Not long before, he had been one of two students chosen to make the annual pilgrimage to a Marian shrine and at Chartres had placed his future work under the powerful protection of the Queen of Apostles; one of the most significant events of his early life.

As he had had previous experience and unexpected success giving catechetical instruction to the roughest of Parisian children, he sought apostolic work that would call for strength and sacrifice—the total dedication that he was so eager to give.

Home Missions

So he applied for the dangerous and demanding Canadian missions, but his superiors refused the request, desiring that he should remain and dedicate himself to the home missions of France. Staying for a short time at Nantes with a priest-friend, who trained men for the home missions, he then continued to Poitiers—a place which, like Francis and Assisi, was destined to be inseparably associated with his name.

In the meantime, however, he had antagonized the Jansenists by his open opposition to their teaching. They held that Christ the Redeemer had shed his blood only for the predestinate and that the conditions for the reception of the Sacraments (especially Penance and the Eucharist) should be as severe and exacting as possible.

Threat of Jansenism

De Montfort’s unfailing loyalty to Christ and His Church and his deep understanding of the immense love of God

in the Incarnation and Redemption made him a militant apostle of traditional theology against these subtle and dangerous innovations. The spirit of Jansenism had by this time eaten into the very vitals of Christianity, had penetrated monasteries, seminaries, and convents, so that the Church (especially in France) seemed in danger of being undermined from within.

“Friends of the Cross”

As part of his campaign against the teachings of Jansenism, de Montfort later founded an association of “Friends of the Cross” so Catholics would be encouraged to fight the evils of the time and make reparation to the Sacred Heart. His devotion to the Sacred Heart was inseparable from his devotion to Mary. These two powerful influences would pour oil into the wounds of a stricken Christianity and restore its vigor.

The formation of this lay association was an example of de Montfort’s instinctive response to the grave spiritual needs of his century. Like a good general, he sensed immediately where the battle-line of the Faith needed strengthening and, without fear or favor, used the most efficient means to meet an assault. Nor could he be satisfied with anything less than complete victory. It was the Marian lay apostolate in eighteenth century France!

In a letter to the association he wrote: “Christian perfection consists:

1. in willing to become a saint—
‘If any man will come after Me’
2. in self denial—
‘let him deny himself’
3. in suffering—
‘let him take up his cross’
4. in doing—
‘let him follow Me.’ ”

It was a program he was to follow faithfully throughout his life. Not that he was a plaster saint—he was far too rugged and uncompromising for that—but the challenge of the Cross never found him without a response. It was a manliness and courage purified to white-heat in the fire of the Holy Spirit.

The old-world town of Poitiers, above the valley of the Clain, has been Christian since the Roman occupation of the country and is one of the earliest centres of Christianity in Europe. Its churches, in which saints such as Radegonde are venerated, date back to the seventh century and it is famous for one of the most ancient burial-grounds. Although the countryside was ravaged by wars and revolutions it was to welcome the Cistercians in the eighteenth century and in its “second spring”—Saint Madeline Sophie and her newly-formed Society of the Sacred Heart.

Arrival at Poitiers

Even with his extraordinary insight into the future and his prophetic powers, it is unlikely that de Montfort, on his arrival at Poitiers, had any realization of the important part the city was to play in his life and in the history of the congregations he was destined to found.

Yet his impact on its citizens was dramatic and immediate. Those who assisted at his Mass in the hospital at Poitiers called out to each other, “Here is a saint. Here is the man for us. Let us detain him and try to keep him.” They petitioned the Bishop to appoint him as their chaplain and the appointment was finally confirmed.

Hospital Chaplain

De Montfort's deep spirituality did not lessen his shrewdness, realism, or masterly flair for organization. In this, he resembles the great Saint Teresa who, after being elevated to the heights of mystical prayer, could conclude an eminently satisfactory business arrangement on behalf of the Reform.

The hospital was in a chaotic state both medically and financially and only a saint would have had the patience and wisdom to overcome the disorders. Typically enough, he gave up his own salary to provide more revenue for the patients, ate the same food as the poorest of them, and gave any money donated to him to the necessities of the patients and the upkeep of their chapel. Not satisfied with this, he even tramped through the city begging assistance on behalf of the sick, so that he soon became a familiar sight—his donkey ambling beside him laden with gifts.

All Things to All Men

What spare time he had left was entirely devoted to the needs of the patients, and no task was too menial for him—waiting at the table, sweeping rooms, preparing beds, nursing those desperately ill, and ministering to the dying. It seemed as though this extraordinary man never slept and had the power of being everywhere he was wanted at the same time.

Opposition

Unfortunately there is nothing like disinterested dedication to arouse jealousy and resentment, so de Montfort's success gained him enemies. Two of his persecutors—the superior of the institution and a member of its committee of management—did everything possible to obstruct and discredit him. This did not surprise him in the least for, as he dryly admitted in one of his letters, “I entered this poor hospital or rather this Babylon, with a firm resolution of bearing, in company with Jesus Christ my Master, the crosses which I well foresaw would certainly befall me if the work were from God.”

Peace Follows

In the midst of the turmoil created by this pair of troublemakers there was a sudden and unexpected calm, for both of them became seriously ill and died within a short time of each other. Such was the impression these strange circumstances created that de Montfort was finally left in peace.

The Chaplain's work in the meantime had greatly increased but he somehow managed to extend it even further by preaching, catechizing, and hearing confessions in many of the outlying parishes of Poitiers. It is difficult to imagine how he accomplished all this with such enthusiasm, yet he added the guidance of ecclesiastical students to his already incredible schedule.

It was at this time that he was obliged to journey to Paris to arrange his sister's entry into a convent. During his three-month absence the hospital again lapsed into chaos, due to appalling inefficiency and neglect. Yet de Montfort not only remedied the disorder soon after his return but also increased his missionary work in the churches of the city and carried on a large correspondence with those who continually sought his advice.

Persecution Follows

As a tribute to his amazing success in bringing about the spiritual reformation of the city, he now began to experience the unwelcome attentions of “the prince of this world.” Diabolic phenomena (similar to that which tormented the Cure d’Ars) added trials and terrors by night to the persecution he was already suffering by day. For de Montfort, as a missionary, had rapidly become famous in Poitiers, and the malice of his enemies had received a new stimulus.

The Daughters of Wisdom

In his anguish at getting any effective cooperation in hospital management, he founded “the Daughters of Wisdom,” a new congregation of women. Several girls, from amongst the poorest citizens of Poitiers, were chosen as pioneers of the movement, even though some of them were blind, crippled, or in uncertain health. De Montfort gathered them together in a room of the hospital, which he named “La Sagess” and placed in it a large Cross as their source of inspiration.

The rule of life he gave them was a well-balanced one of prayer and activity. Although he foresaw that he would not live to witness the growth of the congregation, the knowledge that he had at least made a beginning gave him immense consolation. He realized the important role the Daughters of Wisdom was to play in the life of the Church in later centuries and he was pleased that the sick, the blind, and the crippled had been the privileged ones summoned to the service of the King.

The bitter opposition to his work now became so serious and so dangerous that he felt compelled to resign his position.

A Home Missionary

The Bishop immediately accepted his services as a home missionary and sent him to Montbernage, a suburb of Poitiers that was notorious for its moral decay. There, de Montfort began in earnest his extraordinary career of apostolic activity. His methods were so modern in their approach that they alarmed and bewildered the more conventional clerics. Sometimes it would be the realistic portrayal, in dramatic form, of the truths of the Faith or the struggle of a soul to find salvation. Or it might be the burning of dangerous literature on a great pyre, surmounted by an effigy of the Devil as a society-woman! (The literature was not gathered by witch-hunts, but was brought voluntarily to the missionary by the repentant townspeople.)

What a scene this would make in the twentieth century—a pile of the latest fashionable obscenities burnt outside the Cathedral with the effigy of a satanic society-woman on top of the pyre! It would immediately gain widespread publicity for the campaign for Christian literature by all the mass media of communication and would be worth a hundred sermons—exactly the effect intended by de Montfort. But it takes rare courage to make such a gesture in any century.

Modern Means

Louis Marie de Montfort is very much of our time and would have used radio, television, mass rallies, and pilgrimages with daring, imagination, and skill. He was never concerned about what “they” would think—whether powerful or pious—and went to any lengths of flamboyance to drive home his message. Yet the response was not ephemeral or simply emotional; it was solid and lasting, because it was a response to the message of his own crucified life.

The results of his missions were soon evident in the many churches restored, pilgrimage centers established, contributions given to the poor, and in the real spiritual renewal brought about in the dioceses he had visited.

Other Parishes Follow

Montbernage was only the first of many parishes, almost on the verge of ruin, he revitalized with the fire of his zeal for the Kingdom of Christ. It was here, also, that he erected the first chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin under her new title of “Queen of All Hearts.”

These activities were accompanied by an amazing gift of prophecy, such as his prediction of the recovery of the Governor’s wife when she seemed almost at the point of death.

Crowds flocked to his confessional and thronged to hear him whenever he preached. The situation could only rub salt into the wounds he had already inflicted on the Jansenists. Misrepresenting his work, they complained to the Bishop of Poitiers and de Montfort was peremptorily ordered to discontinue his ministry in the diocese.

Pilgrimage to Rome

Without any attempt to justify himself, he accepted the curt dismissal with serenity. He even seemed glad of the opportunity it gave him to make a pilgrimage to Rome. For a long time he had wanted to obtain permission to volunteer for the missions overseas that he might offer his life for Christ. Martyrdom was never far from his hopes and desires although, in another form, he endured it daily.

Before leaving Poitiers, the scene of so many graces, he wrote a touching letter of farewell to his people, encouraging them to persevere. This message, so confident in the face of overwhelming adversities, was typical of the man:

“It is through Mary,” he wrote “that I look for and shall find Jesus, that I shall crush the serpent’s head, and that I shall overcome my enemies and myself to the greater glory of God.”

On the same day he set out on his pilgrimage in the spirit of the Gospels, with only a Bible, a Crucifix, a Rosary, an image of Mary, and his staff. The few coins he had he gave to the poor, trusting in God for his food and shelter.

It was a penitential pilgrimage of fasting, watching, and prayer, and with only one pause along the way—that he might dedicate himself once more to Jesus through Mary at the Shrine of Loretto.

Rome at Last

At last the great dome of Saint Peter’s came into sight against the pale horizon and, taking off his shoes, de Montfort walked barefoot the two leagues that still separated him from Rome. There, after visiting the churches of the city and its places of pilgrimage, he sought an audience with Pope Clement XI.

On June 6, the request was granted and, for de Montfort, it was a momentous occasion. The Pope listened kindly to his enthusiastic plans for a missionary apostolate and for the honor of being sent to a mission where he might shed his blood for the Faith. (The tenacious reformer of Poitiers was never a man for half measures!) He added that he would regard the Pope’s decision as the will of God and that he was ready to work in any part of the world to which he was sent.

Mission in France

The Pope’s reply was swift and unexpected. Stretching out his hands in the direction of France, he said, “You have in your own country a field worthy of your zeal.” He then explained the anxiety of the Holy See at the

encroachments of Jansenism, which he had just explicitly condemned, and asked de Montfort to teach Christian Doctrine to the people and to help them understand the spirit of Christianity by the renewal of their baptismal promises. Finally, he conferred on him the title of Missionary Apostolic.

Although dumbfounded at the Holy Father's unexpected decision, de Montfort now felt certain of his vocation to the home missions. It was a keen disappointment to him that, for the second time, the door had been firmly closed on his own plans for a martyr's death. Yet he was a man for whom God's Will was the supreme value, even when it meant the sacrifice of his dearest desires. And if his longings for martyrdom could not be literally fulfilled, his enemies would try to provide him with its equivalent!

Little did they expect that the priest they had succeeded in removing from his diocese and whose work they had so subtly undermined, would return as the chosen champion of the Holy See against their own teaching.

Return to France

After a short rest and retreat and a pilgrimage to some of the French Shrines, de Montfort offered his services to the Bishop of his home diocese. As several priests were just beginning a mission in the town of Dinan, the Bishop sent him to join them. This mission and another for the soldiers of the garrison proved to be successful beyond all expectations and de Montfort was asked to preach throughout the neighboring districts.

At this time a strange incident occurred in de Montfort's life, which we can understand only by recalling a prophecy made two and a half centuries before his birth.

Saint Vincent Ferrer and Our Lady of Pity

Saint Vincent Ferrer, the great missionary of the Middle Ages and the apostle of Brittany, was then preaching at a place called La Cheze, near Loudeac, when he happened to notice a large, ancient, but deserted and roofless chapel, almost in ruins and overgrown with briars and nettles. He paused in his sermon and seemed deeply touched by the sight of the abandoned sanctuary, which was known as the Chapel of Our Lady of Pity. Then he began to tell the people what a joy it would be to him if he could restore it to the worship of God and the Honor of the Blessed Virgin.

Suddenly he seemed inspired by a vision of the future and understood that this very work was destined to be accomplished by another missionary in centuries to come.

Prophetic Vision

Looking around him as one filled with the light of the Spirit of God, he said, "This great undertaking is reserved by God for a man whom the Almighty will cause to be born in later times, a man who will come as one unknown, a man who will be greatly contradicted and laughed at; but a man, nevertheless, who will bring this holy enterprise to a happy issue."

Prophecy Fulfilled

There could be no truer portrayal of Louis Marie de Montfort who, in 1707, went to La Cheze, preached to the people there, and felt inspired by God to rebuild the ruined chapel of Our Lady of Pity. Although he had neither

resources for the project nor any hope of assistance, he set to work to raise money for the restoration of the shrine and his efforts met with extraordinary success. The rapid completion of the sanctuary astonished the people of the district, who flocked by the hundreds in procession for the opening ceremony.

A number of other incidents occurred that convinced them that de Montfort had miraculous powers—that he had multiplied bread to feed the poor and had restored invalids to health. Their enthusiasm was so great and their demands on the missionary so incessant that, when he left the city, de Montfort felt the need for a quiet retreat where he could renew his strength.

Returns to His Diocese

So, he retired to Saint Lazare and, after a period of prayer and silence, took up his missionary work once more in his own diocese. Crowds filled the churches and no one could keep count of the number of conversions. Sometimes de Montfort's simple gesture of placing a crucifix before the assembled people and asking them to venerate it, produced an amazing change even in indifferent and hostile congregations. There are those who would dismiss it as mass hysteria, but the incredible influence of the man on his contemporaries cannot be so lightly explained.

He had no pulpit oratory to win the admiration of the crowds and always spoke of the fundamentals of the faith in the most straightforward terms. Frequently he simply recited the fifteen decades of the Rosary with the people and then gave them the Crucifix to kiss. Yet the results of his missions were astounding and the conversions made proved, in most cases, solid and lasting. Again there is a modern touch—he composed some 160 poems, and a number of rousing hymns, using many of them as a simple and effective means of instruction. Even in the years of revolutionary France, these were to keep a flame of Christianity alive in the hearts of the people. His own nuns chanted one of these hymns as they traveled in the tumbrils (carts) to the guillotine, so that even, the depraved mob felt strangely moved and clamored for their release.

Devotion to The Sacred Heart

de Montfort was one of the earliest preachers to recognize the significance of the devotion to the Sacred Heart and to use its message in the struggle against Jansenism. By this means and by encouraging devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to Our Lady, he restored a well-balanced Christianity to areas, which for years had withered in the clutches of harsh and erroneous doctrines. During every mission, an act of public reparation was made to the Blessed Sacrament and the success of the mission left in the hands of Mary.

Apostle of Mary

“The love of Mary” said one of his fellow-missioners, “seemed to have been born with him.” And it is as the Apostle of Mary that he is mainly remembered, for we have seen the fruits of his treatise on “The True Devotion” in the miraculous growth of the Legion of Mary. This book, which de Montfort predicted would be “enveloped in the silence of a coffer” was not discovered until 1842, 126 years after his death. The “inspiration it has given to the Marian lay apostolate amply fulfills de Montfort's prophecy that “in those latter times, God will raise up mighty saints, servants, slaves, and children of Mary . . . who shall kindle the fire of divine love everywhere . . . like sharp arrows in the hand of the powerful Mary to pierce her enemies.” (*From “True Devotion” by Saint Louis de Montfort.*)

True Devotion

“True Devotion” has always borne the stigma of “Marian exaggeration,” but it is interesting to recall that, when Dr. Pusey pressed this accusation, the champion of de Montfort’s teaching proved to be no less a figure than the learned and saintly Cardinal Newman. Probably Saint Louis Marie de Montfort would not state his teaching today in the same theological terms, but he would insist on the same profound relationship between Mary and each member of the Church.

Diocese of Nantes

De Montfort continued to work fruitfully in his native diocese until harassed by the Jansenists and forced to leave. He then offered his services to the great diocese of Nantes and his missions there met with the same remarkable response. Encouraged by the enthusiasm of the crowds, he decided to erect an immense Calvary that, rising from the vast plain that surrounds Pontchateau, would be visible for miles around. It was to be a center of pilgrimage and a perpetual reminder of the promises the people of the district had made to God during the mission.

The project was greeted with joy and 500 laborers immediately volunteered. Soon the work was completed and proved its worth, not only by continuing to stimulate local devotion but also by drawing crowds from other areas—hundreds of people who found here the inspiration for the reformation of their lives. Once again de Montfort showed that he understood and respected the need men have to find God through the windows of the senses—through what is tangible, moving, and essentially human.

Opposition by Jansenists

A mass pilgrimage was arranged for the opening ceremony and the hidden power of the Jansenists within clerical circles is indicated by the fact that they managed to get it cancelled the night before. (The feast-day chosen for the event was the Feast of the Holy Cross.)

They then spread the incredible story that the shrine was built as a fortress where de Montfort and his misguided followers could entrench themselves, threatening the law and order of France. Even more incredibly these accusations were believed and the civil authorities demanded the destruction of the shrine. In spite of protests by the townspeople and their refusal to carry out the order, the work of demolition was brought about by force and, after three months, not a trace remained of the once famous Calvary. However, the townspeople had at least one consolation—they managed to detach the figure of Christ from the Cross before it could be desecrated or destroyed.

De Montfort received this public humiliation with his usual calm. He even foretold that a new Calvary would rise again on the site of the old one. This prediction was finally fulfilled in 1825, when a crowd of 20,000 pilgrims, bearing white standards, surrounded the hill and made a public act of reparation at the restored Calvary.

The missionary again retired to renew his spiritual strength and made a retreat at the Jesuit house at Nantes. Before leaving the diocese, he personally led a courageous and heroic rescue of flood-bound householders, whose district had been inundated by the waters of the Loire.

The Diocese of La Rochelle

Towards the end of March in 1711, de Montfort agreed to a request to give missions to the diocese of La Rochelle, where his work as a home missionary was destined to reach its most amazing climax. His preaching created such scenes of fervor and enthusiasm that he earned the bitter hatred of some of the Calvinists, who determined to assassinate him. When he arrived at the street they had chosen for the attempt, he felt compelled, without understanding why, to retrace his steps and take a long detour to his destination. “My heart became as

cold as ice,” he told a companion, “and I could not take a step forward.”

This was not his only escape from death. An attempt was later made to poison him and, although he survived the dose, his system became so weakened that he suffered its effects for the rest of his life.

Pastoral Work Continues

These persecutions formed a dark background to the increasing brilliance of his pastoral success. Jansenists, Calvinists, even pirates (who unsuccessfully tried to capture him while en route to a mission at the Isle-Dieu) could only interrupt, but never stop, the mighty tide of graces that seemed to accompany his work everywhere, and particularly at La Rochelle. Here the accounts of cures, miracles, and conversions remind one of the days of the early Church. It is an extraordinary record of pastoral activity—one that gives increasing evidence of the sanctity of this untiring and courageous man.

The De Montfort Fathers

Realizing that he had little time left on earth, he now began to organize a society of priests to continue his work. The rule of life he drew up was approved and he chose, from the community of Saint Esprit, a seminarian who was later destined to be the first member of the Company of Mary to work with him—Pere Vatel. The new society known as the De Montfort Fathers was soon to become one of the most enterprising of the missionary congregations, making foundations in many countries of Europe, Asia, and America.

The Daughters of Wisdom Again

De Montfort, with his usual thoroughness and dedication, also completed his plans for the Daughters of Wisdom, and selected as their Superior Madame Trichet, afterwards known as Sister Marie-Louise of Jesus. As the saint predicted, the nuns were given the administration of the hospital at Poitiers, where the congregation had been founded, and later became equally famous not only in other cities of Europe, but also in missionary countries throughout the world.

A severe illness from which de Montfort suffered in 1713 was treated by the barbarous methods of the time, and his survival of the ordeal seemed almost miraculous. His cheerfulness during these operations, performed without anesthetics, was only an expression of the spirit of penance that had characterized his whole life. At this time he told a priest friend that, God had “favored him with a very special grace, which was the abiding presence of Jesus and Mary in the depth of his soul.” He did not attempt to explain it theologically and it is doubtful if he could have done so. It seemed a wholly mystical experience of his union with Jesus, through Mary, which had been the inspiration of his life and apostolate.

He was destined now for a final glorious spring of missionary activity—preaching and praying the rosary in churches, shrines, and streets, and even in the midst of a ribald crowd aboard a market boat. He established innumerable Rosary Confraternities and it was his great love for the rosary that led him to become a Dominican Tertiary.

A Lasting Impression

In spite of ridicule and opposition, his work grew to immense proportions and had a lasting effect on the French Church. As an example of the fruits of his missions, the Cure of Saint-Lo testified that many of his parishioners still practiced the devotions they had learned at these missions 60 years after the saint’s death!

Not content with this prodigious activity, de Montfort established hospitals and schools and still had time and energy for the foundation of the Company of Mary, the Daughters of Wisdom, and the Association of the Friends of the Cross.

The once-Calvinist stronghold of La Rochelle was to be the crown of his missionary achievements, and it was there that he was revered as another Saint Paul. He was besieged at all hours, by people from all classes of society seeking spiritual advice, and many of his visitors claimed to have seen his face transfigured. This occurred publicly as he was preaching in the Dominican church on the glories of Mary on the Feast of the Purification. The phenomena of levitation was also recorded, although de Montfort took every precaution to avoid discovery. So great were the crowds that flocked to hear him that, during one mission, the pulpit had to be placed in the open air at the foot of a large tree.

His Death Approaches

In January of 1716, de Montfort resumed his missionary work in the neighboring parishes and it seemed that he was at the peak of his powers, spiritually and physically. But it was at this very time that he foretold his own death, which he said would occur before the end of the year. His last project, and perhaps the one dearest to his heart, was the organization of a mass pilgrimage to the Shrine of Notre Dame des Ardilliers to obtain the blessing of the Queen of Heaven on the new Company of Mary, and its future work. Pere Vatel and Pere Mulot, destined to be the first two priests of the Company, led the pilgrimage. Having followed in their steps to the Shrine, in spite of the ill-health, which had now become painfully obvious, de Montfort resumed his missionary work at Saint Laurent-sur-Seine. He had left the future of his two congregations in Mary's hands and felt his work on earth had at last been completed.

During the month of April in 1716, as the missionaries were preparing for a visitation by the Bishop of La Rochelle, de Montfort suddenly collapsed. Although he was gravely ill, he managed to preach a last sermon on the Compassion of Jesus. Those who heard him (with no realization of the gravity of his condition) remarked that he seemed to be delivering a farewell message to his people.

de Montfort's Final Message

It is significant that his final sermon should have been on this very subject—the Mercy, Compassion, and loving kindness of Christ. It was the rock of his teaching against which the bitter fury of his enemies beat in vain, just as that same fury had lashed aimlessly against the rock of Peter.

But his victory could only lead to his crucifixion in the cause of Christ.

It was largely due to the labors of de Montfort and his fellow-missionaries that the influence of false doctrines in the French Church was finally overcome. And through the intercession of a Woman “fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in battle array” the Spirit of Truth renewed and vivified the heart of Christian Europe.

de Montfort Receives the Last Sacraments

After his farewell sermons, de Montfort was obliged to admit the seriousness of his illness. He received the Last Sacraments, expressed the wish to die as he had lived—a slave of Jesus and Mary. Even at this moment he was not granted peace or privacy and the room in which he lay was soon crowded with people begging his blessing. It is typical of him that he cheerfully obliged, even adding a few words of consolation and trying heroically to join them in a song. The effort was too much and he lapsed into unconsciousness. His last words were the names of

Jesus and Mary, an expression of his confidence in their power against the forces of evil, and the joyful announcement that he had “finished his course—it is over now, and I shall never sin again.”

He Dies, His Work Lives On

It was eight o'clock on the evening of 28 April 1716, and he was 43 years old. (After his canonization in 1947, this date was chosen as his feast-day.) But this was only the beginning of his work, for it was continued by the Company of Mary and the Daughters of Wisdom and, in spite of persecution, the de Montfort Fathers (as they later became known) gave 430 missions in the 63 years before the French Revolution. The reformation they brought about in France was similar to that achieved in Italy, at the same period, by the Redemptorists. Soon their apostolate was to find a fruitful harvest in several continents.

The Daughters of Wisdom are now numbered in thousands and have foundations throughout the world devoted to charitable activities.

The Legion of Mary

The latest developments of de Montfort's apostolate have been in our own century—the foundation of the Priests of Mary and the Legion of Mary. The association of the Priests of Mary is dedicated to the preaching and practice of the “True Devotion.” The Legion of Mary is one of the most flourishing organizations of the lay apostolate and is based on the teachings of the saint adapted and brilliantly applied to the spiritual needs of our century by Frank Duff.

The Confraternity of Mary, Queen of All Hearts, was first established in Canada, and canonically erected in 1913. It is another manifestation of de Montfort's spiritual influence on the interior life of Christians in our time. Its object is “to establish within us the Reign of Mary as a means of establishing more perfectly the reign of Jesus Christ in our souls.”

Yet perhaps it is in the apostolate of the Legion of Mary that we can best see the genius of de Montfort in action in this century, effecting a reformation as powerful, and inspiring martyrdoms as heroic and as fruitful as in eighteenth century France. Legionaries are surely in the vanguard of those whom the saint foretold would transform Christian society in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of Christ through His Blessed Mother.

Papal Commendation

In spite of criticism of “True Devotion,” it should be remembered that six Popes have recommended it, while Leo XIII renewed the Act of Consecration on his deathbed and Saint Pius X both practiced the devotion and granted the Apostolic Benediction to all who would read the Treatise.

The number of interior transformations it has encouraged and inspired cannot be calculated, but the Confraternity alone numbers several hundred thousand members throughout the world.

Devotion to Mary is the royal highway to the establishment of Christ's Kingship for, as de Montfort assures us:

*“Our union with Jesus always and necessarily follows our union with Mary, because the spirit of Mary is the spirit of Jesus. When we have once found Mary, and through Mary, Jesus, and through Jesus, God the Father, we have found all good. (From “How Mary forms Jesus in us”
- “The Secret of Mary.”)*

Perhaps we could re-read de Montfort's last great prophecy in the light of the spiritual transformation the Marian apostolate has brought about in the present century:

“Through Mary God came into the world the first time. . . .may we not say that it is through Mary also that He will come the second time, as the whole Church expects Him, to rule everywhere and to judge the living and the dead?” (From “Fruits of this devotion” - “The Secret of Mary.”)

As most of us are not theologians, we do not have to construct speculative theological systems about Mary. For if we live total consecration to Mary, as Montfort did, we have the words of Saint Pius X as our light and encouragement:

“Who does not know that there is no more certain and easy way than Mary to unite all with Christ and to attain through Him the perfect adoption of sons, that we may be holy and immaculate in the sight of God?” (From “Ad diem illum.” February 2nd, 1904.)

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